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ABSTRACT

In recent years, mutual help groups have been formed to address problems in substance abuse, chronic physical illness, mental illness, marital disruption, and child abuse. Despite the proliferation of these groups, little research has been conducted to assess their efficacy or what happens in them. The nature of mutual help groups (N=32) was investigated by comparing them to psychotherapy groups (N=35), social-recreational groups (N=59), and task-oriented groups (N=39) on 10 social climate dimensions derived from the 90-item Group Environment Scale. The 10 dimensions were cohesion, leader support, expressiveness, independence, task orientation, self-discovery, anger and aggression, order and organization, leader control, and innovation. The results revealed that all 10 dimensions yielded significant differences. Compared to psychotherapy groups, the mutual help groups had a more active leadership role and greater group cohesion in addition to being more structured and task-oriented and fostering more independence. The psychotherapy groups were more encouraging in the expression of negative and other feelings and showed more flexibility in changing the groups' functions and activities. Future research should assess outcomes in various domains in the different groups to determine the ultimate impact of social climate characteristics on people's adjustment and well-being. (Author/NRB)

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Social Climate Comparison of Mutual Help and Psychotherapy Groups

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Running head: Social Climate Comparison

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Abstract

Mutual help groups (n=32) were compared to three other types of groups (psychotherapy, n=35; social-recreational, n=59; and task oriented, n=39) on 10 social climate dimensions derived from the 90-item Group Environment Scale. All 10 dimensions yielded significant ($p < .05$) differences. Differences between the mutual help and psychotherapy groups were particularly intereting and large in size. The mutual help groups had a more active leadership role and greater group cohesion, in addition to being more structured and task-oriented and fostering more independence. The psychotherapy groups were more encouraging in the expression of negative and other feelings and showed more flexibility in changing the group's functions and activities. Suggestions are made on how the study's findings might be used in the community and how they might be extended in future research.

A Social Climate Comparison of Mutual Help and Psychotherapy Groups

In the past few decades, mutual help groups have been proliferating at a rapid pace. These groups address a wide array of problems including substance abuse, chronic physical illness, mental illness, marital disruption, and child abuse. Despite the proliferation of groups, little research has been done to assess their efficacy or what happens in them. This lack of research may be due to many factors, including the unfamiliarity and sometimes outright skepticism that mental health professionals and researchers have concerning these groups. If the mutual help approach is to develop and become integrated with other services, it is important that research proceed.

Much of the early research on mutual help groups consisted of impressionistic descriptions of particular groups (e.g., Silverman, 1970; Weiss, 1973) and theoretical discussions about the nature of mutual help groups or their historical development (see Caplan & Killilea, 1976). Other research has surveyed group participants (e.g., Knight, Woller, Levy, Frame, & Padgett, 1980; Lieberman & Bond, 1976; Lieberman, Bond, Solow, & Reibstein, 1979) or professionals familiar with mutual help groups (e.g., Black & Drachman, 1985; Levy, 1978). Only recently have more rigorous evaluation designs and comparative approaches been applied to mutual help groups (e.g., Rappaport, et al., 1985; Toro, in press).

The present study investigated the nature of mutual help groups by comparing them to three other types of groups, including psychotherapy groups, using a social climate (Moos, 1974b) approach. Such comparison could help us understand how mutual help groups are different from, or similar to, other groups which exist in the community. The social climate approach to the

measurement of environments offers many advantages, including: (a) well-developed, economically-administered, and objectively-scored measures for assessing diverse social environments, (b) common ways of classifying dimensions of environments, and (c) considerable data testifying to its usefulness (e.g., Moos, 1974a, 1979, 1981).

Method

"Subjects" for the study were 165 groups of four types: mutual help (n = 32), psychotherapy (n = 35), social-recreational (n = 59), and task-oriented (n = 39). The mutual help groups came from a particular organization known as GROW International which operates about 500 groups worldwide. GROW helps its members, most of whom are former mental patients, adjust to community living through structured weekly group meetings and various other social and leadership functions which encourage the development of support networks among members. GROW has been in existence for nearly thirty years and has developed an extensive literature. Its philosophy for personal growth involves self-control, caring for fellow members, and spiritual beliefs. (For a more detailed description of GROW, see Rappaport, et al., 1985.) Data on these groups were obtained in GROW groups in Illinois. Participants completed the GES independently and were told that their responses would remain entirely confidential.

Data on groups of the other three types were obtained from Moos (1981). The psychotherapy group sample includes both inpatient and outpatient therapy groups (mostly led by psychotherapists with traditional psychodynamic orientations), sensitivity groups, and eight support groups of different types (R. H. Moos, personal communication, January 3, 1985). The social-recreational

group sample is composed of chess, bridge, book and cooking clubs, and boys' and girls' sports teams. The task-oriented group type includes groups of undergraduates working on class projects, groups of student assistants in university residence halls, music and art therapy workshop groups, college and university faculty administrative committees, and treatment staff teams in psychiatric and correctional settings.

Social climate was assessed in all groups using the Group Environment Scale (GES; Moos, 1981). The GES consists of 90 items and yields 10 dimensions: Cohesion (member's involvement in and commitment to the group, and their concern and friendship for one another), Leader Support (help, concern, and friendship shown by the leader), Expressiveness (the degree to which freedom of action and expression of feelings are encouraged), Independence (encouragement of independent action and expression among members), Task Orientation (emphasis on practical and concrete tasks and decision-making and training), Self-Discovery (encouragement of revelations and discussions of personal information), Anger and Aggression (tolerance and encouragement of expression of negative feelings and intermember disagreement), Order and Organization (level of structure in the group and explicitness of rules and sanctions), Leader Control (extent to which the leader directs, makes decisions, and enforces rules), and Innovation (encouragement of diversity and change in the group's functions and activities). Moos (1981) presents extensive reliability and validity information on the GES, including data indicating good dimensional internal consistency (ranging from .62 for Independence to .86 for Cohesion) and test-retest reliability (assessed over one month, coefficients ranged from .65 for Independence to .87 for Anger and Aggression).

In addition to obtaining GES ratings from the participants in the mutual help groups, ratings were obtained in 12 of these 32 groups from observers who attended the groups on a regular basis as part of a large evaluation research project (for 6 of the 12 groups, one observer completed the ratings and, for the other 6, ratings of two different observers were averaged to yield a group score).

Results

Group means on each of the 10 GES dimensions, computed across participants in each of the 165 groups, served as the study's dependent variables. Group type (mutual help, psychotherapy, social-recreational, and task-oriented) was the study's "independent variable." Preliminary analyses were done, using Cochran's C (Roscoe, 1975, pp. 290-291), to assess differences in variability across the four group types. These tests not only provided substantive information, but also determined the extent to which the study's data met one of the assumptions of the analysis of variance statistical model (i.e., homogeneity of variances). Of the ten GES dimensions, seven yielded significant ($p < .05$) C's: Cohesion, Expressiveness, Independence, Task Orientation, Anger and Aggression, Order and Organization, and Innovation (see Table 1). F-tests, done to assess variance differences between the mutual help groups and each of the other group types separately (Horowitz, 1974, p. 281), indicated significantly ($p < .05$) smaller variances for the mutual help groups on all seven variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

For the study's main analyses, ten one-way ANOVA's were done, one for each GES dimension, to assess whether any significant mean differences existed among the study's four types of groups. All ten ANOVAs yielded significant Fs ($p < .05$). The Dunnett test (Keppel, 1973) was then computed for each GES dimension to assess differences between the mutual help groups which was treated as the "comparison sample," and the other three types of groups. Results of these analyses indicated greater Cohesion, Leader Support, Task Orientation, and Order and Organization, and less Anger and Aggression in the mutual help groups when compared to all three other groups. In addition, the mutual help groups showed more Independence and Leader Control than both the psychotherapy and social-recreational groups. Mutual help groups also showed less Expressiveness than psychotherapy groups and greater Self-Discovery than both the task-oriented and social-recreational groups. Because of the similarity in clientele and purpose, as well as the large differences found between mutual help and psychotherapy groups, the means on the 10 GES dimensions for these two groups are graphically represented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The pattern of results based on observers' ratings in 12 of the mutual help groups was similar to that based on participants' ratings, though the observers' tended to be less extreme. Matched t-tests indicated only two significant ($p < .05$) differences between observers and participants: On both Cohesion ($t = 2.57$, df=11, $p < .05$) and Task Orientation ($t = 2.48$, df=11, $p < .05$),

participants' ratings were about two scale points higher than those of observers.

Discussion

The study's findings indicated numerous differences in social climate between mutual help groups and three other types of groups (i.e., psychotherapy, social-recreational, and task-oriented). Because virtually all GES variables yielded statistically significant findings in this large sample (total N=65), for the mutual help and psychotherapy group comparisons as well as other comparisons, the interpretation of the study's findings should carefully consider the size of mean differences between group types in addition to statistical significance.

Of particular interest were the differences between the mutual help and psychotherapy groups. These two types of groups both focus on improving the mental health status of participants. One might expect, therefore, that the mutual help groups would be more similar to the psychotherapy groups than to the other two types of groups. This, however, was not the case. In fact, on nine out of ten GES dimensions (all but Self-Discovery), the mutual help and psychotherapy groups were significantly different, and on eight of these nine dimensions (all but Independence), the mean difference between these two groups was larger than for any other pair of means (see Table 1). The patterning of means for most GES dimensions thus placed the mutual help and psychotherapy groups at opposite poles from one another with the task-oriented and social-recreational groups falling in between.

These large differences between mutual help and psychotherapy groups could be explained in several ways. Participants in these two types of groups may

truly experience a very different social environment. The approaches used in the two settings may differ more than one would expect based on their ostensible similarities of clientele and mental health focus. The results suggest that mutual help groups may emphasize task-oriented problem-solving and socializing more than "therapeutic" activities. Thus, while both groups foster the discussion of personal material (Self-Discovery), the mutual help groups seem more cohesive, structured, and task-oriented and also seem to have a more prominent leadership role (mutual help leaders were both more supportive and more controlling) and seem to encourage more independence. The psychotherapy groups, on the other hand, seem more tolerant of the expression of negative feelings (Anger and Aggression), seem to encourage more freedom of expression in general (Expressiveness), and show more flexibility in changing the group's functions and activities (Innovation).

Another possible explanation for the large mutual help vs. psychotherapy differences is suggested by the low variances and the extremely high level of Cohesion in the mutual help groups. It may be that participants in the mutual help groups, in comparison to the psychotherapy and other groups, may feel more pressured to respond in ways prescribed by the leadership or the organization's philosophy (despite assurances of confidetiality). This interpretation is less tenable, however, when one considers that observers, who would be less prone to conform to group standards, rated the mutual help groups in similar ways to participants. Furthermore, the relative consistency of the mutual help groups could be expected since they all came from one particular organization, whereas groups of each of the other three types of groups were composed of a mixture of groups of different forms and from different settings (see Moos, 1981). Thus,

the variances for the other groups may be unusually high, rather than those of the mutual help groups being unusually low.

There are several ways in which the study's findings could be used in the community. They could be shared with people involved in the various types of groups to inform them about their groups and how they compare to other types of groups. Such comparisons might give them new ideas for their own groups and help them understand other types of groups. Improved understanding could perhaps be especially important between mutual help and psychotherapy approaches, given the frequent lack of cooperation and occasional antagonism that exists between them (see Toro & Keogh, 1984). The differences between the mutual help and psychotherapy group also highlight the potential for matching persons and groups to maximize benefits. For example, given differences such as those found here, a very sensitive person who needs structure, control and strong support, might best be served in a mutual help group (since the high level of Anger and Aggression, as well as the flexibility of a psychotherapy group, could be upsetting) and a person with difficulties with authority and control might be better off attending a psychotherapy group. The point here is less that these differences necessarily hold for all mutual help and all psychotherapy groups, but rather that the assessment of group social climate may be usefully applied in making appropriate referral decisions. Furthermore, if such "person-group" matches are eventually made, their impact on the persons would need to be assessed.

In interpreting the study's findings, it is important to consider the fact that all data collected were based on subjective perceptions of what the groups are like, rather than actual behavior. It may well be that, although the

participants in mutual help groups perceive their groups much differently than participants in psychotherapy groups, the actual behavioral differences between these two types of groups may be less obvious. In fact, a recent study which collected actual observational data from helping interactions of both psychotherapists and members of mutual help groups found considerable similarity between these two groups in terms of actual behavior (Toro, in press). Actual behavioral data from the types of groups studied here, perhaps collected alongside social climate data, would be desirable in future research and could help assess relationships between social climate and actual behavior.

There are a few other improvements and extensions that could be made on the current study. Data on all groups to be compared could be collected at approximately the same point in time under identical conditions (in the present study, the data for the mutual help groups were collected several years after the data for the other groups). Also, it would be useful to assess the social climate of other types of groups, including mutual help and psychotherapy groups with different orientations, to determine the generality of this study's findings. Finally, it will be important to assess outcomes in various domains in the different groups to determine the ultimate impact of social climate characteristics on people's adjustment and well-being.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviasions, Fs, and Multiple Comparisons

Assessing Mutual Help Group Differences on 10 GES Dimensions

	MH	PT	SR	TO	F	Multiple Comparisons
Cohesion*						
M	7.83	5.47	6.57	6.02	14.25[a]	MH > PT[a], MH > SR[a], MH > TO[a]
SD	.79	1.97	1.52	1.60		
Leader Support						
M	7.79	5.32	6.94	6.01	20.61[a]	MH > PT[a], MH > SR[b], MH > TO[a]
SD	1.26	1.43	1.23	1.72		
Expressiveness*						
M	5.12	5.97	5.13	5.40	2.88[b]	PT > MH[b]
SD	.94	1.78	1.46	1.43		
Independence*						
M	7.15	6.17	5.57	6.58	13.01[a]	MH > PT[a], MH > SR[a]
SD	.73	1.32	1.15	1.50		
Task Orientation*						
M	7.53	4.61	5.28	5.99	27.36[a]	MH > PT[a], MH > SR[a], MH > TO[a]
SD	.98	1.83	1.34	1.36		
Self-Discovery						
M	6.36	6.49	4.83	4.25	19.78[a]	MH > TO[a], MH > SR[a]
SD	.79	1.79	1.63	1.63		
Anger and Aggression*						
M	1.79	5.26	4.68	4.33	32.15[a]	PT > MH[a], TO > MH[a], SR > MH[a]
SD	.93	1.90	1.62	1.60		
Order and Organization*						
M	7.37	3.99	4.66	5.38	26.69[a]	MH > PT[a], MH > SR[a], MH > TO[a]
SD	.78	1.74	1.96	1.61		
Leader Control						
M	5.90	3.07	4.87	5.11	18.73[a]	MH > PT[a], MH > SR[b]
SD	1.13	1.39	1.81	1.82		
Innovation*						
M	3.27	5.79	4.13	5.15	19.15[a]	PT > MH[a], SR > MH , TO > MH[a]
SD	.76	1.63	1.78	1.40		

Note. For Fs, df=3,142. MH=mutual help (n=32), PT=psychotherapy (n=35), SR=social-recreational (n=59), TO=task-oriented (n=39). The ">" sign indicates a significant difference between the mutual help group and the other group, based on Dunnett's multiple comparison test.

[a] $p < .01$ [b] $p < .05$

*Cochran C-test indicated a significant ($p < .05$) variance difference.

Figure 1

Pattern of Means for Mutual Help and Psychotherapy Groups